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AUTHOR Blechman, Elaine A.
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ABSTRACT

Three folk psychology predispositions towards group behavior were proposed: (a) The folk psychologist breaks group behavior down into the actions of individuals; (b) He attributes group and group member behavior to causes internal to the group, and ignores situation causes; and (c) He attributes behavior to fixed rather than alterable causes. It was suggested that family research is susceptible to these predispositions. Accordingly, a sample of current family research, all the family listings in Psychological Abstracts, 45, 1971, 1-6, that represented data based research were classified. The results of classification were: (a) Individual family members' behavior received attention in 69% of the cases, the family group received attention in only 4% of the cases, and the situation was never the recipient of effect; (b) in 61% of the cases, the implied cause was internal to the group, in 12% of the cases, the implied cause was external to the group; (c) in 19% of the cases, the implied cause was alterable, in 42% of the cases, the implied cause cause was fixed. Implications of these predispositions for family therapy were discussed. (Author)

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ATTRIBUTION THEORY AND FAMILY THERAPY: ATTRIBUTIONAL IMPEDIMENTS TO RESEARCH ON FAMILY BEHAVIOR CHANGE[1]

Elaine A. Blechman[2]
Yale University

How does the man in the street (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1973) explain group behavior? And, how does the folk psychology of groups affect family research and family therapy? This paper proposes three basic characteristics of the folk psychology of groups, shows their prevalence in research on families, and discusses their implications for family therapy.

Paradoxically, the folk psychology of groups has received less attention in social psychology than has the folk psychology of the individual. The writings of Heider, Kelley, Bem, Jones and Davis, and de Charms (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967, 1971, 1972, 1973; Bem, 1965, 1967, 1972; Jones & Davis, 1965; de Charms, 1968) consider how the layman answers the question: "Why did I choose this car?" or "Why did he lie to the other student?" rather than "Why did a group of students picket the ambassador from Russia?"

The causes to which group behavior can be attributed fall into the same nominal categories as the causes of individual behavior (Kelley, 1967). I can attribute the activities of a group, the Watergate burglars, for example, to causes internal or external to the group. Among internal causes are: relationships among group members ("They entered the Watergate because each wanted to convince the others of his loyalty."), characteristics of individual group

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members' ("They entered the Watergate because each believed that this would help the cause of national security.") When the internal causes of group action are compared to the internal causes of individual action, a new type of cause appears--the relationships of group members to each other.

Among the external causes of group behavior are: the attitudes of outsiders to the group ("They entered the Watergate because critics had questioned the loyalty of Cuban refugees to the Republican party."), economic realities that affect the group ("They agreed to do this work because many had been unemployed for several months."), and situational pressures that affect a key member of the group ("Liddy proposed this plan to Hunt who had much influence with the others.")

The quandary of choice between internal and external causes of individual behavior ("Is it hot in here or is it only me?"[3]) is aggravated when the folk psychologist considers the internal and external causes of group behavior. Evidence of group behavior often appears as the successive actions of individual group members ("Senator X was indicted yesterday for accepting a bribe," "Informed sources report that Congressman J committed suicide because of overwhelming evidence of his misuse of campaign funds."). When evidence of group behavior is received little by little, the folk psychologist confronts the following causal possibilities: the situation affects all group members, group membership affects grop members, individuals affect the group, the situation affects some, unrepresentative group members.

In addition to the internal-external dimension, causes of group

behavior can be sorted into fixed or alterable causes. Fixed causes are those that, at the point of attribution, can not be changed either by those affected by the cause, or by others. Sex, age, birth order, are all fixed causes. Alterable causes are those that, at the point of attribution, can conceivably be changed. Place of residence, occupation, diet, are all alterable causes, as are attitudes and behavior. In between it is helpful to insert a difficult to alter category to include causes that could conceivably be altered, at the point of attribution, but only with great difficulty. To shift examples to family behavior, I can attribute a family argument to fixed causes, such as: the age of the participants ("Whenever a fifty-year old woman marries a twenty-five year old man there is bound to be trouble."), or to alterable causes, such as: the role allocation between participants ("They only argue because neither one knows what jobs they are responsible for in the kitchen."), or to causes that are difficult to alter: "They argue because she has far less energy to do things than he does." The fixed-alterable dimension (called by Rest & Rosenbaum temporary-enduring) has direct implications for efforts at behavior change either by outsiders such as therapists, or by group members. Attribution of a problem to a fixed characteristic suggests that the problem is incurable; while attribution to an alterable characteristic suggests that improvement is possible. Attribution of a problem to a difficult to alter cause keeps everyone in turmoil. "Is the family really responsible for their problem? Could they not change their circumstances if they wished?"

Any suggestions about the use of internal-external and fixed-alterable dimensions in the folk psychology of groups must be tentative. But, there are three predispositions that seem to dominate the folk psychology of groups. One is the predisposition to break group behavior down, whenever possible, into the activities of individual group members. Whether because individual behavior is more interesting than group behavior, or because group behavior is harder to grasp than individual behavior is not clear. But commonplace examples of both types abound. The journalist's principle of trying to provide the reader with a human (i.e. individual) interest angle illustrates his belief that people are more interested in individuals than in groups. Our difficulty in understanding the behavior of the Germans before the second World War, solely in the light of economic and political pressures on the group, rather than in terms of questions of individual morality, illustrates how difficult it is to grasp group behavior. Individual exceptions to group behavior seem to defeat our folk psychological attempts to see the average trend in group behavior (Kelley, 1973). The folk psychological tendency to break group behavior down into the actions of individual may, finally, be related to our dislike as individuals of considering ourselves subject to external constraints (Brehm, 1966, 1972; Brehm & Cohen, 1962). Our reluctance to consider the effects of group membership on our own activities, the effects of being a woman, a black, may obstruct our ability to see behavior at the level of a group.

A second predisposition that seems to dominate the folk psychology of groups is the attribution of group behavior to internal group characteristics: to characteristics of individual group members or to

characteristics of the total group. The experiences of Black Americans and of women provide examples of this point. Laudable achievements of group members are dismissed as the accomplishments of unrepresentative group members; and offensive acts committed by group members are attributed to characteristics of the group. But the impact of the external situation (e.g., attitudes towards the group, discriminative legislation) is unduly disregarded (Caplan & Nelson, 1973). Nisbett and Valins (1971) have pointed out how often observers of individual actors ignore situational constraints on the actor's behavior.

A third, and final, predisposition that seems to dominate the folk psychology of groups is the attribution of group behavior to fixed characteristics rather than to alterable ones. Perceptions of group members (Allport, 1954; Asch, 1964) tend to be organized by such fixed characteristics as skin color and sex. And these fixed characteristics often provide the basis for tragically circular explanations of human behavior, "Why did she do that? Because she's a woman. And, that's the way women are." Fixed characteristics may be preferred because they are salient, they are easily and reliably measured, and they are easily recalled. Attribution to alterable group characteristics, such as the power discrepancy between mates, occurs infrequently in the folk psychology of groups (personal communication, David Olson). Alterable causal characteristics may be unpopular in folk psychology because they describe variable entities or states. Some of the time the variable entity accompanies the effect, and some of the time it does not. (Some of the time the husband appears to have far more power than his wife; and some of the time he does not.)

As Kelley (1973) has pointed out, the absence of a distinctive relationship between a cause and an effect, makes the folk psychologist uncertain about the attribution. And, because uncertainty is uncomfortable, it is reasonable to expect that a folk psychologist faced by two equally plausible causes, one fixed and one highly variable, will choose the fixed cause.[4]

Although the folk psychology of groups may emphasize the actions of individuals and internal, unalterable causes, what evidence is there that professionals are susceptible to these same folk biases? Two professional traditions about families, that have hardily resisted endless reasoned argument and evidence, suggest that, in fact, professionals are not immune to folk predispositions toward groups. One such professional tradition about families, steadfastly attributes problems in individual family members to disordered relationships with the family, particularly with the mother (Freud, 1938; Despert, 1970); and, ignores the contribution of the external situation to the behavior of the individual. A second such professional tradition about families, frequently criticized by Richard Bell (e.g., 1971) attributes family member behavior to the family, but ignores the impact of the family member upon the family. When an autistic child is found to have a cold, unresponding, mother, the child's deficiencies are attributed to the mother's behavior far more often than is the mother's behavior attributed to the child's deficiencies.

Method

To provide additional support for the notion that professional thinking about families is susceptible to folk psychology predispositions about groups, a sample of current research on families,

appearing in the first six months' issues of the 1971 Psychological Abstracts was rated (Vol. 45, Nos. 1-6, plus the semiannual index.)

1. Articles were selected that were listed under the subject titles: family, family relationships, family therapy. (Some sample titles are: No. 578, Attitudes of Lower and Middle Class Families Concerning Personal Adjustment; No. 5854, Sex Linked Inheritance of Spatial Ability; No. 8048, Self-derogation and Childhood Family Structure.)

2. Articles were excluded under the subject heading: parents and children. It was felt that this subject category would bias the results in the favor of our hypothesis about individuation of the family group.

3. Articles were excluded that appeared in foreign languages, as dissertations, or as books.

4. Only data based research was classified.

Abstracts that met these criteria were sorted into categories based on (a) whether the variable was fixed, difficult to alter, or alterable, (b) whether the variable was measured at the level of the external situation, or at the internal level of the group's characteristics, or individual family member characteristics, and (c) the direction of effect between variables as interpreted by the author.

Alterability. Each variable measured in a study was sorted into one of three categories: Fixed after measurement (this category included genetic endowment, sex, race, number of siblings, ordinal position in family), Difficult to Alter (this category included physiology, social class, parent occupation, religion), and Alterable (this

category included marital status, behavior, attitudes, educational attainments).

Level of Measurement. Each variable measured in a study was sorted into one of three categories: measured at the level of the individual Family Member (for example, suicidal behavior, enzyme disorder, sex, marital status, birth order), Family group (for example, history of family illnesses, number of children, interaction pattern), or Situation (for example, type of psychotherapy, rural or urban setting).

Direction of Effect. While experimental research justifies interpretations of direction of effect between two variables, correlational research does not. Nonetheless, many correlational studies imply a causal relationship between variables in the choice of variables for measurement, and in the author's discussion of results. Because of an interest in interpretations of direction of effect in research on families, rather than in the actual results; and, because many correlational studies were expected in the sample, rules for classifying the implied direction of effect in correlational studies were established. It was found that two independent raters could achieve 92% reliability using these rules. (a) Any correlation between variables which could easily be interpreted as bidirectional in effect was so classified even when the author implied one direction of effect. For example, a study of Antecedents of Psychological Adjustment, reported that children's psychological adjustment was significantly related to the home's democratic atmosphere. This study was classified as bidirectional. (b) In the absence of a bidirectional relationship, when the author reported an interest in the antecedents of variable X, or

in t e hereditability of Variable X, Variable X was designated as Variable 2, and other variables measured and correlated with Variable 2 were designated Variables 1. (c) When the relationship was not bidirectional, and the author reported an interest in the effects of Variable Y on Variable X, Y was designated Variable 1, and X was designated Variable 2. (d) A study in which several Variables 1 of the same type, and with the same relationship to Variable 2, were measured, was only entered one time in Table 1.

Results and Discussion

Of 209 abstracts with family topics, 47 could be classified: 1 experimental, and 46 correlational. Multiple types of variables made the total number of Variable 1-Variable 2 relationships, 60. Of these, 17 were classified as bidirection l, and 43 were classified as unidirectional in implied effect. The percentage of variable-variable relationships in each category is shown in Table 1.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Current family research was classified to determine if three apparent predispositions of the folk psychology of groups are evident in family research.

First, is the tendency to focus on the behavior of individual group members rather than on the behavior of the group. Table 2 summarizes the types of effects found in this sample of family research and demonstrates that individual family members receive attention in 69% of the cases; while the family group receives attention in only 4% of the cases. Not once is the situation regarded

as the recipient of effect. This yield a total of 73% of the cases which were classified as unidirectional.

Second, is the tendency to attribute the behavior of group members and of the total group to causes that are internal to the group. Table 2 shows that in 61% of the cases, the implied cause was internal to the group; in 12% of the cases, the implied cause was external to the group.

Third, is the tendency to attribute the behavior of the group and its members to fixed causes. Once again, Table 2 shows that in 42% of the cases, the implied cause was fixed. In 19% of the cases, the implied cause was alterable. And, in 12% of the cases, the implied cause was difficult to alter.

The prediction that internal causes and fixed causes are most popular implies that the most popular causes are internal-fixed causes. Inspection of Table 2 shows that this is the case. Internal-fixed causes constituted 37% of the sample.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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It is informative to compare these results with the results reported by Caplan and Nelson (1973). They classified cause and effect relationships in a six months' sample (from 1970) of research on Black Americans. In their sample, 31% of the studies were experimental, as compared to 2% in the present sample. They reported that problem characteristics of Black Americans were associated with the fixed internal characteristic of skin color in 48% of their sample; with personal characteristics in 37% of their sample; and with the

situation in 16% of their sample. The relative weights accorded to internal and external characteristics resembles the weights of internal and external characteristics in the present sample. Since Caplan and Nelson did not classify their sample along the alterability dimension, further comparison is impossible.

It was suggested that fixed causes are preferred because they are easily and reliably measured. Inspection of the fixed causes cited in this sample supports this notion, since in 56% of the cases in which the cause was fixed, either family size or birth order was the cause. Both family size and birth order can be obtained from records, they do not change, people readily remember the size of their family, or their ordinal position in the family, and people are rarely insulted when asked about family size or birth order.

Earlier in this paper, two mental health traditions were mentioned as evidence that professional thinking about families is susceptible to the predispositions of folk psychology. The sample of family research reviewed here suggests that both traditions are alive and well. First, is the attribution of problems in individual family members to the family, and disregard of the situation's effect upon the individual. In this sample, attribution of individual family member behavior to the family or to other family members occurred in 57% of the cases; attribution to the situation occurred in 12% of the cases. Second, is the attribution of family member behavior to the family, but neglect of the impact of the family member upon the family. In this sample, the family group was accorded causal impact upon individual family members in 37% of the cases; the individual family member was accorded causal impact upon the famil group not once.

Do the trends found in this sample of research on families represent folk psychology dispositions about group behavior? Or, do these trends reflect the attitudes of the researcher who occasionally investigates families but whose primary training is in individual behavior? At best we can say that many of the trends that have been described here were noted by Mogey (1962) as typical of the field of family research.

Thus far we have illustrated that family research is susceptible to three dominant characteristics of the folk psychology of groups. But we have not documented that family therapy is equally susceptible. No inference about family therapists can come from observations of family researchers, since the two groups come from different disciplines, with different training, and different objectives. And, it is harder to obtain unobtrusive, quantifiable measures of the causal attitudes of family therapists towards families, since the formal dicta of family therapy emphatically contradict the folk psychology predispositions towards groups that we have described (Olson, 1970). It is reasonable to suppose, however, that the novice family therapist and the therapist who occasionally treats families are susceptible to the folk biases towards groups. And, it may be, that the hallmark of a well trained family therapist is his ability to disregard folk biases towards groups which are part of his native culture.

For those family therapists who are susceptible to folk psychological biases, either because of gaps in their training, or because formal psychological training does not totally innoculate the professional against folk psychology, here are some dangers.

First, the attribution of client behavior to fixed causes

provides the change agent with a handy explanation for lack of change. Johnson, Feigenbaum & Weiby (1964), for example, reported that teachers readily attributed the presence of educational improvements in their students to their own tutorial efforts; but attributed the absence of improvement to defects in their students.

And, emphasis upon fixed causes of problems, when communicated to a client family is also unhelpful. The client gets a feeling of insightful hopelessness ("Now that I know why I have this problem, I know why I can't do anything about it."), and the client begins to worry about the personal defects that caused his incurable problem (Nisbett & Valins, 1971).

Because many deviants (e.g., drug takers, alcoholics, delinquents) are assigned to enforced treatment (Kittrie, 1971) with their families, it is worth considering the effects of attributing problems in family members exclusively to the family. If family disorder is the exclusive cause of the deviant's behavior than the deviant's behavior is unrepresentative and he is sick. He needs therapy and so does his family. But social change is not in order. And, the therapist to whom the family is assigned for treatment, must look hard enough at the family to find a disorder that could cause such deviant behavior.

Taken together, folk psychology predispositions towards groups may encourage the family therapist to concentrate disproportionately on current disordered family behavior, and may hinder him from planning how the family should look after successful intervention.

In summary, attribution theory may contribute most to the field of family therapy by first revealing our folk biases towards groups

groups that jeoparoize the priniciples of family therapy; by demonstrating how vulnerable we all are to these folk biases; and, by suggesting how to effectively innoculate family therapists against such folk biases. This paper has attempted a first step in this direction by proposing tentative principles of the folk psychology of groups, and showing the susceptibility of family researchers to these biases. The more important, second step, that remains to be taken, is the design of innoculations against these biases for family theorists and family therapists.

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TABLE 1

Distribution of Types of Variable-Variable Relationships Found in a Sample of Current Research on Families (Psychological Abstracts, 1971, 45, 1-6.)

Category[a]	Variable 1[b]	Type of Relationship[d]	Variable 2[c]	% of Relationships
1a	F/U	$\longrightarrow$	F	2
1b	F/DA	$\longrightarrow$	F	2
2a	F/U	$\longrightarrow$	FM	23
2b	F/DA	$\longrightarrow$	FM	7
2c	F/A	$\longrightarrow$	FM	7
5a	FM/U	$\longrightarrow$	FM	12
5b	FM/DA	$\longrightarrow$	FM	3
5c	FM/A	$\longrightarrow$	FM	5
8a	S/U	$\longrightarrow$	FM	5
8c	S/A	$\longrightarrow$	FM	7
10a	F/A	$\longleftrightarrow$	F/A	2
10b	F/A	$\longleftrightarrow$	FM/A	10
10c	FM/A	$\longleftrightarrow$	FM/A	15

[a] There were no entries in the following categories: 1c; 3a, b, c (F→S); 4a, b, c (FM→F); 6a, b, c (FM→S); 7a, b, c (S→F); 8b; 9a, b, c (S→S).

[b] F=Family; FM=Family Member; S=Situation; U=Unalterable; DA=Difficult to Alter; A=Alterable.

[c] F=Family; FM=Family Member; S=Situation; A=Alterable.

[d] Variable 1⟶Variable 2=Implied direction of causal effect is from Variable 1 to Variable 2. Variable 1⟷Variable 2=The relationship between Variable 1 and 2 could be bidirectional.

TABLE 2

Types of Implied Causes and Effects Found in a Sample of Family Research

	Level of Measurement of Effect		
	Family	Family Member	Situation
	4%	69%	0

	Alterability of Cause		
Level of Cause	Fixed	Difficult to Alter	Alterable
External	5%	0	7%
Internal	37%	12%	12%

FOOTNOTES

1 This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Montreal, 1973.

2 The author expresses her gratitude to David Olson for his valuable comments upon this paper.

3 The author thanks John Reid for his suggestion of this example which also appeared in an article on Hypnosis and Attribution Theory.

4 It is reasonable to expect this choice, when a choice must be made. Otherwise, we can expect the folk psychologist to discount the impact of one variable (Kelley, 1973)